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Kurdish Communalism

Janet Biehl

Sep. 10 2011

During the past five years, the Kurds of southeastern Turkey have built communalist institutions on a scale unprecedented in the world. Earlier this year, in “Hasankeyf: A Story of Resistance,” I described the long-term Kurdish resistance to a massive hydroelectric dam project, coordinated by 36-year-old Ercan Ayboga.

After the article was published, Ercan (pronounced AIR-john) wanted to reach out to communalists in other parts of the world, and make the Kurdish achievement in assembly democracy known to them, so we agreed on an interview. We began our conversation the by e-mail. Then in September, I visited Diyarbakir for the Mesopotamian Social Forum, and on a sunny day in Sumer Park, we sat down and continued the interview. His calm determination and clear-headedness, were impressive to me. So was the clear resolve of the Kurdish people to continue their fight for “democratic autonomy,” even under conditions of persecution.

The war between the Turkish state and the PKK guerrillas, which began in 1984, continues to this day. The Turkish state routinely demonizes Kurdish freedom activists as “terrorists” by associating them with the PKK. Tragically, the press of

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<http://new-compass.net/article/kurdish-communalism>

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Turkey's NATO allies is silent, at best, not only on the conflict but on the criminalization of Kurdish political activity. The silence, in my view, must be broken, and the remarkable Kurdish achievement made known to the world.

—Ercan, what is your background? Where do you live, and what is your job?

—Around forty years ago my parents emigrated from Turkish Kurdistan to Germany because of the bad economic situation in their homeland. So I grew up in Germany, but our connection with Kurdistan never ceased, as we visited every two years. Let's say that I have two "identities," which I regard as an opportunity to know well both a Western and an Eastern society. Since age sixteen, I have been continuously politically active in different leftist German and Kurdish organizations. The main two arenas for my engagement are the freedom struggle of the Kurdish people, which started in the 1980s, and left organizations that oppose war, discrimination against migrants, and the mistreatment of workers in both Germany and Turkey.

After completing my studies in civil engineering and hydrology, I worked for more than two years in the municipality of the largest city of Turkish Kurdistan, called Diyarbakir (in Kurdish: Amed). Between the fall of 2004 and the beginning of 2007, I was heavily involved in establishing a campaign to oppose the large Ilisu Dam Project on the Tigris River, which would have grave social, cultural, ecological, and political impacts on many many people. Since 2007 I worked in this campaign, called the Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive, as international coordinator also from Germany, but spent two to three months annually in Kurdistan. The Initiative has as its objective, not only to see the cancellation of the Ilisu project, but to build up a coalition of dam-critical and water-issue movements in the Republic of Turkey. At the same time I began a Ph.D. on river restoration.

—Is Turkish Kurdistan a village society? How much is it industrialized?

—Kurdistan is no longer a classic village society. In the 1960s, the Turkish state introduced the capitalist economy into Turkish Kurdistan, and an industrialization process like that of Europe or North America is under way, albeit in smaller steps. But the feudal elements are still strong in half of the provinces, and industrial capitalism is still less dominant in Kurdistan than in the Western Turkish provinces.

Turkish territory doesn't have much oil, but all the oil it does have lies in Kurdistan. The big five hydroelectric power plants on the Euphrates River in Kurdistan produce an important part of the country's electricity. But the local population doesn't benefit much economically.

The first agriculture in human history was developed here. Agriculture remains the main source of income, as farmers till the soil in subsistence farming. But now Turkey's greatest cotton production also happens here, and most of the hard wheat (used for pasta) comes from Kurdistan. Up to the 1990s, animal husbandry was a significant part of the economy, but the war between the Turkish Army and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) guerrillas destroyed most of it. While Turkey once exported meat, for the past years it has imported meat.

The past twenty years have seen an enormous shift. In the armed conflict, the Turkish Army destroyed 4,000 villages and forcibly displaced at least two million people. Today around half of Turkey's Kurds no longer live in Kurdistan. Because of the war, and for economic reasons, they have moved to Istanbul and other cities. The Kurdish cities, like Diyarbakir, have grown fast (half of the people live in cities now), and a large, impoverished lumpenproletariat has developed.

The eastern two-thirds of the mainly Kurdish-populated provinces are the poorest in the Republic of Turkey. Three provinces in western Turkish Kurdistan, where the freedom struggle is not so strong and the wartime destruction was limited, are an exception.

According to recent statistics, Kurds constitute almost half of the Turkish working class. They work mainly in the worst-paid sectors of the economy, like construction, restaurants, tourism, and textile. They are not well organized as workers and are not strong in the big labor unions.

In recent years mining is on the rise in Turkish Kurdistan. Large international companies are interested in chromium, coal, and gold. As the most territory is mountainous, intensive mining exploitation would negatively affect both the population and nature.

—*What effect has the mountainous terrain had historically?*

—The mountains of Kurdistan—the Eastern Toros and the Northern Zagros, rainy, partly forested—have historically shaped Kurds' character, making them rebellious, robust, and stubborn. Considering that the Kurds have never had their “own” strong state but instead have arranged themselves within the dominant states of others (Turks, Arabs, Persians), we can say that mountains are a principal reason why Kurdish culture has survived.

That is especially true in the twentieth century, when repression and efforts at assimilation became systematic. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, Kurds based in the mountains waged classic guerrilla armed struggles against the Iraqi, Turkish and Iranian states (in the smallest part of Kurdistan, in Syria, there are almost no mountains). Although they met with some defeats, the resistance has never been completely destroyed, nor can it be. If the Kurds ever do achieve some rights, the mountains will have played a crucial role.

Another effect of the mountains is that in some regions, the tribal composition of Kurdish society is still dominant. Before the mid-twentieth century, Kurdish society was organized primarily in tribes. Most Kurdish people still have a strong village character--almost every Kurd knows from which village he/she comes and to which tribe or clan he/she belongs.

—What is the movement's thinking about the greater Middle East?

—The Kurdish freedom movement proposes democratic confederalism for all countries and cultures of Middle East, as it is more appropriate than the existing centralized, half-decentralized, or totalitarian political structures there. Before the twentieth-century foundation of nation-states in the Middle East, the structures did not control the societies deeply; the different regions had certain freedoms and self-government, and the tribal structures were dominant. Here many local structures are still strong and resist the state influence.

Further, in the Middle East the cultural diversity is so high that a communalist society could much better consider this richness. It would allow ethnically or religiously nondominant groups to organize themselves and contribute significantly to a dynamic cultural diversity. Direct democratic structures may make sense here too: in the recent uprisings in many countries, new democratic movements were born or have been strengthened. We would like to object to opinions that consider Arabs or other populations incapable of democratic thinking.

—Is Kurdish society traditionally patriarchal? How strong is Kurdish feminism?

—Until the 1980s the Kurdish society was completely patriarchal. There were no women's rights or feminist groups, not even among the more liberal Alevi Kurds. The most important dynamic in overcoming the patriarchal structures became the Kurdish freedom movement. And without women's participation, the movement could not possibly have achieved broad popular support. By around 1990 women were participating widely in this movement, and between 1990 and 1992 women were leading demonstrations, which started to change the situation significantly. In the middle of 1990s a broad ideological discussion started in the movement, in which patriarchal structures in the whole society were criticized systematically. Since then, many women's organizations have been founded in all areas of the struggle.

In the 2000s, patriarchal structures in half of Kurdish society—the part influenced directly by the freedom movement—changed significantly. Women became more present in the streets and in organizations. Unlike twenty or thirty years ago, women now are accepted everywhere and murder of women [in honor killings] is not accepted. Most of the other half of Kurdish society has now been changing too.

Today women are present in all the political structures, at all levels, in the Kurdish freedom movement, which is a result of the long gender discussion and of women's struggle within the movement and in the democratic assemblies. For instance, in the BDP, all chairperson positions must be held by a man and a woman, and there is a 40 percent requirement for both sexes in all management boards, public parliaments, and elected councils. As "gender liberation" is one of the three main principles used by the freedom movement besides "democracy" and "ecology," a social perspective without women's liberation is unthinkable.

—Does assembly democracy have roots in Kurdish history?

—Assembly democracy has limited roots in Kurdistan history and geography. As I've said, the society's village character was and is still fairly strong. Some villages had hierarchy and aghas (feudal big land owners), but in others, where these factors were absent, villages organized common meetings in the kom (village community) in which they made decisions. In many cases, older women participated in these meetings, but not young women.

In past centuries, tribes sometimes held assemblies with representatives from all families (or villages) in order to discuss important issues of the tribe or the larger society. The tribal leader carried out the decisions that the assembly accepted.

During their long history, Kurdish tribes used from time to time and from region to region a confederal organizational structure for facing political and social challenges. It was based on voluntariness, so not all tribes of a certain participated in the confederal structure. But in most of Kurdistan, many non-Kurdish tribes or societies were not much involved in the confederal system.

In the 1990s, as the Kurdish freedom movement grew stronger, an effort was made to build up assemblies in "liberated" villages. PKK guerrillas promoted village assemblies, and in villages where the guerrillas were strong, most of the people accepted them. But just as they were getting under way, the Turkish army destroyed 4,000 villages and their political structures. Thereafter the repression intensified. Since 2005, in some of the villages that were close to the freedom movement, this idea has been developed again. Some villages organize regular democratic assemblies, fully including women and all parts of the society.

—How did communalist ideas become known among Kurds? How important are the writings of Murray

But in the mountainous areas in Iraqi Kurdistan, the KCK/PKK guerrillas—which control those areas—have brought a very different understanding. Today in the 60 to 70 villages where the guerrillas are dominant, the population has started to establish democratic assemblies that include women. The people have started to learn to organize by their own means and to make decisions based on specific democratic procedures.

As a result we have a very contradictory situation. The region governed by the PDK and the YNK does not have even the basic elements of a normal Western representative democracy, and in the region controlled by PKK there are growing elements of democratic confederalism.

The political development in Iraqi Kurdistan shows that even in an oppressed culture, a broad, base-democratic organization is necessary. It would not help much the Kurds to have their own state or even autonomy if democracy, participation, tolerance, and ecological orientation are missing from the political structures and decision-making processes.

—What happens if the popular democracy that spans established state boundaries makes a decision that collides with one of the four nation-states?

—The Kurdish freedom movement has declared that it is not against existing state boundaries and does not want to change them. But at the same time the movement expects that the states respect all decisions of the population. The movement speaks of two authorities, one the state and the population. In democratic confederalism, two different regions of neighboring states can come closer, for instance in terms of culture, education, economy, without challenging the existing states. But in a system of democratic confederalism, the Kurds of different states, or any other suppressed culture in more than two different states, would come closer after decades of separation. This aspect is still not defined well and needs to be discussed deeper.

in Turkey), is a state where a confederal structure would make much sense. More than the other states, Iranian society is ready for such a political structure.

In Syrian Kurdistan, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is also part of the KCK, promotes democratic confederalism. Many Syrian Kurds have supported the freedom movement since the 1980s and now promote the idea of confederalism. The PYD became active politically in the last five to six years. Since the start of the broad protests in Syria in March 2011, this perspective has become very powerful. The Kurds join the protests and have become a crucial factor in the whole struggle. They demand not only autonomy but democracy for all of Syria and democratic autonomy for the Kurdish regions, and the right to organize and defend themselves against attacks.

Iraqi Kurdistan also has a party that is part of the KCK: the Party for a Democratic Solution in Kurdistan (PCDK). But this party cannot work legally, as some years ago the regional Kurdish government forbade it. So democratic confederalism is discussed very only in a very limited way by intellectuals, the media, or the population and is not (yet) a big subject. Only in the regions close to the borders, which are under the control of the PKK guerrillas, is democratic confederalism discussed openly and deeply.

But Iraqi Kurdistan has its own constitution and parliament—a more or less autonomous state in its own right!

Iraqi Kurdistan has no elements of communalism because the regional government is conservative, authoritarian, and non-ecological, and does not support women's rights. It superficially has a representative democracy, but in reality the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (YNK) share the power fifty-fifty and are very corrupt. Since the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003, all the small progressive elements of these two parties have been lost.

Bookchin? Does communalism have other intellectual sources?

—The Kurdish freedom movement had its ideological sources in the 1968 student movement and the Turkish left's Marxist-Leninist, Stalinist, Maoist, Trotskyist, and other communist theories. At the end of the 1980s, the Kurdish freedom movement embarked on a critique of the actually existing (state) socialist model, and in later years it would be deepened. The critique of the 1990s said, among other points, that it's important to change individuals and society before taking the power of any state, that the relationship between individuals and state must be organized anew and that instead of big bureaucratic-technocratic structures, a full democracy should be developed.

In 1999, when the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured and the guerrilla forces were withdrawn to Iraqi Kurdistan, the freedom movement underwent a process of comprehensive strategic change. It did not give up the idea of socialism, but it rejected the existing Marxist-Leninist structure as too hierarchical and not democratic enough. Political and civil struggle replaced armed struggle as the movement's center. Starting in 2000, it promoted civil disobedience and resistance (the Intifada in Palestine was also an inspiration).

Further, the movement gave up the aim of establishing a Kurdish-dominant state, because of the existing difficult political conditions in the Middle East and the world; instead, it advanced a long-term solution for the Kurdish question within the four states Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria: democratic confederalism. It now considers it more important to have a democratic, social and tolerant society than to have one's own state. For Turkey, it has proposed the foundation of a second or democratic republic.

During this process of strategic change, the freedom movement activists read and discussed a new literature that supported and could make contributions to it. It analyzed books

and articles by philosophers, feminists, (neo-)anarchists, libertarian communists, communalists, and social ecologists. That is how writers like Murray Bookchin, Michel Foucault, and Immanuel Wallerstein came into their focus.

The Kurdish freedom movement developed the idea of “democratic confederalism” (the Kurdish version of communalism) not only from the ideas of communalist intellectuals but also from movements like the Zapatistas; from Kurdish society’s own village-influenced history; from the long, thirty-five-year experience of political and armed struggle; from the intense controversies within Turkish democratic-socialist-revolutionary movements; and from the movement’s continuous development of transparent structures for the broad population.

—Have those factors and the Declaration of Kurdish Confederalism, published in March 2005, led to the creation of democratic, decision-making assemblies?

—This declaration was the first step in developing communalism in Kurdistan. Since then, Abdullah Öcalan wrote three comprehensive Defenses, the first in 2001 in two volumes, the second in 2004, and the last and most comprehensive in 2009 in five volumes, all of which has further developed the content of the communalism idea.

We foresee communalism as developing first in Turkish Kurdistan. Since 2007 the freedom movement has created democratic and decision-making assemblies in neighborhoods of cities where it is strong, particularly in the provinces of Hakkari, Sirnak, Siirt, Mardin, Diyarbakir, Batman, and Van. The assemblies were established to make decisions on all common problems, challenges, and projects of the respective neighborhood according the principles of a base democracy—the whole population has the right to participate. In some of the assemblies, non-Kurdish people are participating, like Azerbaijanis and Aramaic people.

twenty-five regions in Turkey with major autonomous rights. These autonomous regions and their assemblies would also assume major responsibilities in fields like education, health, culture, agriculture, industry, social services and security, women, youth and sports. The central government would continue to conduct foreign affairs, finance and external defense services.

In addition, the Kurdish freedom movement demands that Turkish Kurdistan have control over its own “security,” or self-defense; and the right to manage the natural environment and natural resources. At the same time it demands that Turkish Kurdistan be able to establish specific social, cultural, economic and political ties with the other three parts of Kurdistan, in Iran, Iraq and Syria.

—Do these ideas have support in the Kurdish regions of Iran, Iraq, and Syria?

—In Turkey, the Kurdish freedom movement is in implementation phase, but in the three other parts, the Kurds are in the first stage of discussing democratic confederalism. The existing Kurdish parties and organizations that are not part of the Kurdish freedom movement give no importance to it. They support either full independence for Kurdistan or a classical model of autonomy and federation.

But organizations that are part of or close to the KCK, and intellectuals and small groups, promote democratic confederalism as well as the democratic autonomy project of the DTK. The thirty-five hundred activists arrested since 2009 have all been members of the KCK which is an illegal organization. Every two years they have meetings with delegates from all four countries—they meet secretly—in the mountains.

In Iranian Kurdistan, the PJAK (Party for Free Life in Kurdistan), which is part of KCK, promotes democratic confederalism. Especially young Kurds have started to discuss this idea, as it is different from the past perspectives of an independent state or a federation. Iran, with its very rich cultural diversity (here there were no massacres or displacements of Kurds, as

—Of all the thousands of people arrested and charged with KCK membership [see below for KCK] in recent years, only one has gone free. All the others are in prison.

—You have taken communalism farther than anyone anywhere on the planet—and you do it under extreme adversity. I want to pause for a moment to let that sink in.

All right. What is the freedom movement’s thinking about the rest of Anatolia, the non-Kurdish parts of Turkey?

—The Kurds are a large ethnic culture in the Republic of Turkey—25 to 30 percent of the whole population. They were one of the republic’s two founding cultural elements, but in the years after the founding in 1924, they were deceived and repressed. The Turkish government has long rejected any basic and autonomous rights for the Kurds. Even the language was forbidden from being spoken in the streets.

But for a thousand years before 1924, the relationship between the Turks and the Kurds was mostly positive, which shows the deep connections between the two cultures. This fact should be the foundation of reorganizing an equal relationship.

The Turkish Kurds’ legal party, the BDP, proposes “democratic autonomy” for the whole republic. It prepared a document by that name at the end of 2010. Generally it envisages a fundamental democratization in the Turkey’s political and administrative structure, achieving it through democratic participation by incorporating people into processes of decision-making. The essential vision is not to create smaller structures with characteristics of the nation-state; rather, the democratic decision-making structures in the societies should be developed through a combination of base democracy and council democracy.

And rather than being a purely “ethnic” and “territorial” conception, democratic autonomy proposes a regional and local structure through which cultural differences are able to freely express themselves. Thus it proposes to establish twenty to

In Diyarbakir, the largest city in Turkish Kurdistan, there are assemblies almost everywhere. They are stronger in the city than in the rural areas. There are even some assemblies in far-away Istanbul.

There are assemblies at several levels. At the bottom are the neighborhood assemblies. They choose the delegates that constitute the city assembly. In Diyarbakir, ideas are discussed in the city assembly, of which the city council is part—not officially, not legally, but in our system. If the city assembly makes a certain decision on an issue, then the city council members who are part of the city assembly will promote it. (But the city council also has members from the other parties, like the ruling AKP, which don’t agree with it.) The city council has the legal power to make decisions that become laws. But for the people, the city assembly is the legitimate body.

When decisions on a bigger scale have to be taken, the city and village assemblies of a province come together. In the provinces of Hakkari and Sirnak, the experience has had very positive results. The state authority has no influence on the population—the people don’t accept the state authorities. There are two parallel authorities, of which the democratic confederal structure is more powerful in the practice.

At the top of this model is the DTK (Democratic Society Congress), which brings together all Kurds in the Republic of Turkey. It consists of more than five hundred civil society organizations, labor unions, and political parties—they make up 40 percent of its members; 60 percent of its members are delegates from village assemblies.

The DTK provincial assemblies were crucial in electing the candidates for the Turkish parliament of the legal pro-Kurdish party, the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party). For the last elections, the Diyarbakir provincial assembly decided on six candidates chosen by the DTK—those selected became candidates of the BDP for parliament. (Six of 36 elected candidates are now

in prison—the court did not release them. We don't know when or whether they will be liberated.)

Slowly but surely, democratic confederalism is gaining acceptance by more Turkish Kurds. Recently, the DTK presented a draft paper on democratic autonomy for Turkish Kurdistan. At a big meeting in Diyarbakir in July 14, 2011, the DTK declared itself in support of “democratic autonomy.” It seeks to realize democratic autonomy step by step, by Kurds' own means, and especially where the Kurdish freedom movement is strong. Much of Kurdish society approved, but the idea was controversial in Turkish society.

—What are the peace villages?

—One result of the discussions of democratic confederalism has been an objective to found new villages on the communalist idea or transform existing villages whose conditions are suitable for that. Such villages are to be democratic, ecological, gender equal, and/or even peace villages. Here peace not only refers to the armed conflict; it expresses the people's relationships among themselves and with the natural world. Cooperatives are the economic and material base of these villages.

The first peace villages were developed in 2010. In Hakkari province, which borders Iraq and Iran and where the freedom movement is very strong, several villages decided to develop a cooperative economy. The new political and social relationship of the population and the economy are suitable for that, as the freedom movement is very strong there, with direct support from 90 percent of the society. Close to the city of Weran-shah (Viranşehir), the construction of a new village with seventy households based on the idea of peace villages just started. In Van province, activists have decided to build a new ecological women's village, which would be something special. This would enforce the role of women in the society. Women who have been victims of domestic violence will be accepted. These small communities could supply themselves with all or almost all the necessary energy.

—How widespread are the assemblies in Turkish Kurdistan?

—In reality, the assembly model has not yet been developed broadly for several reasons. First, in some places the Kurdish freedom movement is not so strong. Almost half of the population in Turkey's Kurdish areas still do not actively support it. In those places there are no few or no assemblies.

Second, the discussions among the Kurds on democratic confederalism have not proceeded everywhere as well as they might.

And third, the repression by the Turkish state makes further development very difficult. About thirty-five hundred activists have been arrested in the past two and a half years, since 2009, which in many regions has significantly weakened the structures of democratic confederalism. There have been trials for two years. The military clashes between Turkish Army and the Kurdish guerrillas are once again on the increase. Seven days ago [c. September 20] they arrested seventy people from a city assembly in a province near the Iraqi border. The state simply says these assemblies are coordinated by the KCK (Union of Communities in Kurdistan), the umbrella structure of the leftist Kurdish freedom movement in Middle East, of which today PKK is a part, which is an illegal structure, and that becomes the pretext for arresting them.

—You take a huge risk, just by participating.

—People have been arrested whose only activity was to participate in a city assembly. In the last six months 1,650 people have been arrested for being in the KCK.

—What happens to them when they are arrested?

—They go to jail. Eventually they will have a trial, on a charge that the state concocts. But the delays are long. And they can't speak Kurdish in the courts, because the state doesn't accept the language.

—Are they ever found innocent and freed?